

Visuddhimagga

The *Visuddhimagga* (Pali; English: *The Path of Purification*), is the 'great treatise' on Theravada Buddhist doctrine written by Buddhaghosa approximately in the 5th Century in Sri Lanka. It is a manual condensing and systematizing the 5th century understanding and interpretation of the Buddhist path as maintained by the elders of the Mahavihara Monastery in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka.

It is considered the most important Theravada text outside of the Tipitaka canon of scriptures,^{[1][2]} and is described as "the hub of a complete and coherent method of exegesis of the Tipitaka,"^[3] but it has also been criticised for its non-canonical departures, and its interpretation of *dhyana* as concentration-meditation.

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Background

Structure

The structure of the *Visuddhimagga* is based on the *Ratha-vinita Sutta* ("Relay Chariots Discourse," MN 24),^[4] which describes the progression from the purity of discipline to the final destination of nibbana in seven steps.^[5] The *Visuddhimagga*'s material also strongly resembles the material found in an earlier treatise called the Vimuttimagga (c. 1st or 2nd century).^[6]

Reflecting later developments

The *Visuddhimagga*'s doctrine reflects Theravada Abhidhamma scholasticism, which includes several innovations and interpretations not found in the earliest discourses (*suttas*) of the Buddha.^{[7][8]} Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* includes non-canonical instructions on Theravada meditation, such as "ways of guarding the mental image (nimitta)," which point to later developments in Theravada meditation.^[9]

Kasina-meditation

The *Visuddhimagga* is centered around *kasina*-meditation, a form of concentration-meditation in which the mind is focused on a (mental) object.^[10] According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "[t]he text then tries to fit all other meditation methods into the mold of kasina practice, so that they too give rise to countersigns, but even by its own admission, breath meditation does not fit well into the mold."^[10] In its emphasis on *kasina*-meditation, the *Visuddhimagga* departs from the Pali Canon, in which dhyana is the central meditative practice, indicating that what "jhana means in the commentaries is something quite different from what it means in the Canon."^[10]

Non-Theravada influences

Kalupahana notes that the *Visuddhimagga* contains "some metaphysical speculations, such as those of the Sarvastivadins, the Sautrantikas, and even the Yogacarins".^[11] Kalupahana comments:

Buddhaghosa was careful in introducing any new ideas into the Mahavihara tradition in a way that was too obvious. There seems to be no doubt that the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentaries are a testimony to the abilities of a great harmonizer who blended old and new ideas without arousing suspicion in the minds of those who were scrutinizing his work.^[12]

Contents

Summary

The *Visuddhimagga* is composed of three sections, which discuss: 1) Sīla (ethics or discipline); 2) Samādhi (meditative concentration); 3) Pañña (understanding or wisdom).

- The first section (part 1) explains the rules of discipline, and the method for finding a correct temple to practice, or how to meet a good teacher.
- The second section (part 2) describes samatha's practice, object by object (see Kammatthana for the list of the forty traditional objects). It mentions different stages of concentration.
- The third section (part 3-7) is a description of the five skandhas (aggregates), ayatanas, the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination (Pratitya-samutpada), and the practice of vipassana through the development of wisdom. It emphasizes different forms of knowledge emerging

because of the practice. This part shows a great analytical effort specific to Buddhist philosophy.

Seven Stages of Purification

This comparison between practice and "seven relay chariots" points at the goal. Each purity is needed to attain the next. They are often referred to as the "Seven Stages of Purification" (*satta-visuddhi*):^[13]

1. Purification of Conduct (*sīla-visuddhi*)
2. Purification of Mind (*citta-visuddhi*)
3. Purification of View (*ditthi-visuddhi*)
4. Purification by Overcoming Doubt (*kankha-vitarana-visuddhi*)
5. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of What Is Path and Not Path (*maggamagga-ñānadassana-visuddhi*)
6. Purification by Knowledge and Vision of the Course of Practice (*patipada-ñānadassana-visuddhi*)
 1. Knowledge of contemplation of rise and fall (*udayabbayanupassana-nana*)
 2. Knowledge of contemplation of dissolution (*bhanganupassana-nana*)
 3. Knowledge of appearance as terror (*bhayatupatthana-nana*)
 4. Knowledge of contemplation of danger (*adinavanupassana-nana*)
 5. Knowledge of contemplation of dispassion (*nibbidanupassana-nana*)
 6. Knowledge of desire for deliverance (*muncitukamyata-nana*)
 7. Knowledge of contemplation of reflection (*patisankhanupassana-nana*)
 8. Knowledge of equanimity about formations (*sankharupekka-nana*)
 9. Conformity knowledge (*anuloma-nana*)
7. Purification by Knowledge and Vision (*ñānadassana-visuddhi*)
 1. Change of lineage
 2. The first path and fruit
 3. The second path and fruit
 4. The third path and fruit
 5. The fourth path and fruit

The "Purification by Knowledge and Vision" is the culmination of the practice, in four stages leading to liberation and Nirvana. The emphasis in this system is on understanding the three marks of existence, dukkha, anatta, anicca. This emphasis is recognizable in the value that is given to vipassana over samatha in the contemporary vipassana movement.

Siddhis

According to scholars, the *Visuddhimagga* is one of the extremely rare texts within the enormous literatures of various forms of Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism to give explicit details about how spiritual masters were thought to actually manifest supernormal abilities.^[14] Abilities such as flying through the air, walking through solid obstructions, diving into the ground, walking on water and so forth are performed by changing one element, such as earth, into another element, such as air.^[15] The individual must master kasina meditation before this is possible.^[16] Dipa Ma, who trained via the *Visuddhimagga*, was said to demonstrate these abilities.^[17]

Influence

Traditional Theravada

The *Visuddhimagga* is considered the most important Theravada text outside of the Tipitaka canon of scriptures.^{[1][2]} According to Nanamoli Bhikkhu, it is "the hub of a complete and coherent method of exegesis of the Tipitaka, using the 'Abhidhamma method' as it is called. And it sets out detailed practical instructions for developing purification of mind."^[3]

Contemporary Theravada

The *Visuddhimagga* is one of the main texts on which contemporary *vipassana* method is based, together with the *Satipatthana Sutta*. Yet, its emphasis on *kasina*-meditation and its claim of the possibility of "dry insight" has also been criticised and rejected by some contemporary Theravada scholars and *vipassana*-teachers.

According to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "the *Visuddhimagga* uses a very different paradigm for concentration from what you find in the Canon."^[18] Bhante Henepola Gunaratana also notes that what "the suttas say is not the same as what the *Visuddhimagga* says [...] they are actually different," leading to a divergence between a [traditional] scholarly understanding and a practical understanding based on meditative experience.^[19] Gunaratana further notes that Buddhaghosa invented several key meditation terms which are not to be found in the suttas, such as "*parikamma samadhi* (preparatory concentration), *upacara samadhi* (access concentration), *appanasamadhi* (absorption concentration)."^[20] Gunaratana also notes that the Buddhaghosa's emphasis on *kasina*-meditation is not to be found in the suttas, where *dhyana* is always combined with mindfulness.^{[21][note 1]}

Bhikkhu Sujato has argued that certain views regarding Buddhist meditation expounded in the *Visuddhimagga* are a "distortion of the Suttas" since it denies the necessity of jhana.^[22] The Australian monk Shravasti Dhammika is also critical of contemporary practice based on this work.^[23] He concludes that Buddhaghosa did not believe that following the practice set forth in the *Visuddhimagga* will really lead him to Nirvana, basing himself on the postscript to the *Visuddhimagga*.^[23]

Even Buddhaghosa did not really believe that Theravada practice could lead to Nirvana. His *Visuddhimagga* is supposed to be a detailed, step by step guide to enlightenment. And yet in the postscript [...] he says he hopes that the merit he has earned by writing the *Vishuddhimagga* will allow him to be reborn in heaven, abide there until Metteyya (Maitreya) appears, hear his teaching and then attain enlightenment.^{[23][note 2]}

See also

- Buddhaghosa
- Vimuttimagga
- Patisambhidamagga
- Śīla
- Samatha
- Vipassana

Editions

Printed Pali editions

- Caroline A. F. Rhys Davids, *Visuddhimagga* Pali Text Society, London, 1920 & 1921. ([Latin script](#))
- Warren, H. C. & Kosambi, D. D. *Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosâcariya*, [Harvard Oriental Series](#), Vol. 41, 1950.^{[26][27][28]}([Latin script](#))
- Hewavitarne Bequest edition, Colombo, Sri Lanka ([Sinhala script](#))

South-East Asia

Sinhala

- *Sinhala Visuddhimargaya*, Pandita Matara Sri Dharmavamsa Sthavira, Matara, Sri Lanka, 1953 (Sinhala)

Burmese

- Hanthawaddy Press edition, Rangoon, Myanmar ([Burmese script](#))

Thai

- Royal Siamese edition, Bangkok, Thailand ([Thai script](#))
- *คัมภีร์วิสุทธิมรรค (Khamphi Wisutthimak)*, Somdej Phra Buddhacarya (Ard Asabhamahathera), sixth edition. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, B.E. 2548 (2005). [ISBN 974-91641-5-6](#)

English translations

- The Path of Purity, Pe Maung (trans.), Pali Text Society, London, 3 vols., 1922–31 [Part 1: Of Virtue \(http://lirs.ru/do/The_Path_of_Purity_Part-I,Maung_Tin,1923.pdf\)](#), [Part 2: Of Concentration \(http://lirs.ru/do/The_Path_of_Purity_Part-II,Maung_Tin,1929.pdf\)](#) & [Part 3: Of Understanding \(http://lirs.ru/do/The_Path_of_Purity_Part-III,Maung_Tin,1931.pdf\)](#)
- Bhikkhu Nyanamoli (trans.), *The Path of Purification, Visuddhimagga* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120925190451/http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>), Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy 2011, [ISBN 955-24-0023-6](#).
- *Buddhist Meditation*, Edward Conze (trans.), NB: Partial translation, 2002, [ISBN 81-215-0781-2](#)
- N.R.M. Ehara (trans.), Soma Thera (trans.) and Kheminda Thera (trans.) (1995). *The Path of Freedom (Vimuttimagga) by the Arahant Upatissa*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society. [ISBN 955-24-0054-6](#). Online: <https://archive.org/details/ArahantUpatissa-Vimuttimagga-PathOfFreedom.pdf>

Other European translations

- *Der Weg zur Reinheit*, Nyanatiloka & Verlag Christiani (trans.), Konstanz, 1952 (German)
- *Le chemin de la pureté*, Christian Maës, Fayard 2002 (Français), [ISBN 978-2213607658](#)

Notes

1. See also Bronkhorst (1993), *Two Traditions of Meditation in ancient India*; Wynne (2007), *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*; and Polak (2011), *Reexamining Jhana*
2. Devotion to Metteya was common in South Asia from early in the Buddhist era, and is believed to have been particularly popular during Buddhaghosa's era.^{[24][25]}

References

1. See, for instance, Kheminda Thera, in Ehara et al. 1995 p. xliii: "The *Visuddhimagga* is a household word in all *Theravāda* lands. No scholar of Buddhism whether of *Theravāda* or of *Mahāyāna* is unacquainted with it."
2. Biographical article (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Buddha-founder-of-Buddhism>) *Britannica* – June 14th, 2017 "...According to the various traditions of Buddhism, there have been buddhas in the past and there will be buddhas in the future. Some forms of Buddhism hold that there is only one buddha for each historical age; others hold that all beings will eventually become buddhas because they possess the buddha nature (tathagatagarbha)..."
3. *Nyanamoli 2011*, p. xxvii.
4. *Shankman 2008*, p. 53.
5. See *Thanissaro (1999)* (<http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.024.than.html>) for a translation of the Ratha-vinita Sutta. See the various *Visuddhimagga* printings listed below to see the manner in which this sutta is explicitly integrated into the work.
6. *Vimuttimagga & Visuddhimagga - A Comparative Study*. PV Bapat, Ivii
7. Kalupahana, David J. (1994), *A history of Buddhist philosophy*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited
8. Sujato, Bhante (2012), *A History of Mindfulness* (http://santipada.org/santipada/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/A_History_of_Mindfulness_Bhikkhu_Sujato.pdf) (PDF), Santipada, p. 329, ISBN 9781921842108
9. *Shaw 2006*, p. 5.
10. Bhikkhu Thanissaro, *Concentration and Discernment* (http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books/Bhikkhu_Thanissaro_Jhanas_Concentration_Wisdom.htm)
11. *Kalupahana 1994*, p. 206.
12. *Kalupahana 1994*, p. 207-208.
13. *Gunaratana 1994*, p. 143-174.
14. Jacobsen, edited by Knut A. (2011). *Yoga Powers*. Leiden: Brill. p. 93. ISBN 9789004212145.
15. Jacobsen, edited by Knut A. (2011). *Yoga Powers*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 83–86. ISBN 9789004212145.
16. Jacobsen, edited by Knut A. (2011). *Yoga Powers*. Leiden: Brill. pp. 83–86. ISBN 9789004212145.
17. Schmidt, Amy (2005). *Dipa Ma*. Windhorse Publications Ltd. p. Chapter 9 At Home in Strange Realms.
18. *Shankman 2008*, p. 117.
19. *Shankman 2008*, p. 136.
20. *Shankman 2008*, p. 137.
21. *Shankman 2008*, p. 137-138.
22. *Sujato 2012*, p. 332.
23. *The Broken Buddha* (<http://www.buddhistische-gesellschaft-berlin.de/downloads/brokenbuddhanew.pdf>) by S. Dhammika, see p.13 of 80
24. *Sponberg 2004*, p. 737–738.

25. "Maitreya (Buddhism) -- Britannica Online Encyclopedia" (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/358868/Maitreya#toc358868main>). Retrieved 2009-01-28.
26. Stede, W. (October 1951). "The *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghosācariya by Henry Clarke Warren; Dharmananda Kosambi". *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (3/4): 210–211. JSTOR 25222520 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25222520>).
27. Stede, D. A. L. (1953). "Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosācariya by Henry Clarke Warren; Dharmananda Kosambi". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*. **15** (2): 415. doi:10.1017/s0041977x00111346 (<https://doi.org/10.1017%2Fs0041977x00111346>). JSTOR 608574 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/608574>).
28. Edgerton, Franklin (January 1952). "Visuddhimagga of Buddhaghosācariya by Henry Clarke Warren; Dharmananda Kosambi". *Philosophy East and West*. **1** (4): 84–85. doi:10.2307/1397003 (<https://doi.org/10.2307%2F1397003>). JSTOR 1397003 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1397003>).

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External links

- Mahasi Sayadaw, *The Progress of Insight (Visuddhiñāna-katha)* (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/mahasi/progress.html>)
- Ve. Matara Sri Nanarama, *The Seven Stages of Purification & The Insight Knowledges* (http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/bm7insight.pdf)
- The entire *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification* by Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa tr. by Nānamoli Thera (<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/nanamoli/PathofPurification2011.pdf>)
- The Path of Purification (*Visuddhimagga*) by Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa (http://www.dhammatalks.net/Books12/Bhadantacariya_Buddhaghosa-Path_of_Purification.pdf)

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